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ABSTRACT

Research was undertaken to test the hypothesis that reactance-based responses are facilitated by self-focused attention. (Psychological reactance has been defined as a motivational state that occurs when a person perceives that his or her freedom has been threatened in some way.) In addition, these studies served as further tests of the predictive similarity of manipulated self-assurance and dispositional self-consciousness. The research utilized the following reactance paradigm: Subjects' initial attitudes toward a favorably portrayed candidate were measured; subjects then received a pervasive communication in support of the candidate that either was or was not coercive in its wording; finally, subjects' attitudes toward the candidate were reassessed. Reactance was defined in this situation as resistence to the persuasion attempt. Three sequential studies were carried out. Results were consistent with previous data indicating that self-attention increases awareness of transient affective states. Findings also further broaden the data base indicating that manipulated self-awareness and dispositional self-consciousness are quite comparable psychological states. (Author)

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Self-awareness, Self-consciousness, and Reactance

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The lure of the forbidden fruit, the sense of resentment when a behavioral option disappears, our resistance to being told what to do or what to believe--all of these experiences have been analyzed in terms of psychological reactance. Reactance has been defined as a motivational state that occurs when a person perceives that his freedom has been threatened in some way; this state causes the person to attempt to reassert or regain the threatened freedom.

The research I am going to discuss was undertaken to test the notion that self-directed attention might mediate this reassertion response. Conceptually, there are several potential pathways for such a mediational effect. Although I was led to this research by one possibility in particular, I am going to defer consideration of the several possible pathways until I have presented data on the more basic question--whether in fact self-focus does have an impact on reactance. Three studies have been conducted, by myself and Mike Scheier, as demonstrations of the impact of self-directed attention on previously-established reactance phenomena. As a group, these studies represent conceptual replications of each other, in two respects: first, they tested very similar predictions, in two kinds of reactance-including contexts; secondly, they made use of two different operationalizations of the self-attention construct. I will elaborate on these points below.

One context in which reactance can occur is the attempt to persuade. That is, one kind of freedom is the freedom to hold any attitude one wants on a given subject. A high pressure communicator can implicitly threaten this freedom by being pushy or coercive in his attempt to persuade. Reactance caused by this coerciveness may lead people to reassert the threatened freedom by resisting the persuasion attempt--even to the point of shifting their opinions in the direction opposite to that advocated by the communicator. Thus, whereas gentle persuasion is often a useful technique for altering opinions, pushy tactics can be counterproductive. The first study I will be discussing tested the idea that such resistance to coercive persuasion attempts would be greater among persons in whom self-attention was high than among those in whom it was lower. This study was portrayed to female students at the University of Miami as being an investigation of impression formation. A description was presented of what was ostensibly a candidate for appointment to a state study commission on the subject of marijuana use. (The material used here and in the subsequent communications duplicated that used in previous studies.) The candidate was portrayed as being student-oriented and appealing in a number of respects, because prior research has indicated that reactance occurs only among people who initially favor the position that is subsequently forced on them. An opinion premeasure, taken after subjects had read this profile, asked subjects to indicate how much they favored or opposed the appointment of the candidate to the commission. In line with previous research, most persons initially did favor the appointment; only these subjects were retained for the data analysis. Each subject had read this material and responded to the premeasure alone. After completing the premeasure, the subject gave the booklet back to the experimenter, who in turn gave the subject a second booklet, and escorted her to a second experimental room. This arrangement was used in order to coordinate the reactance manipulation and the self-awareness manipulation as closely as possible. Self-awareness was varied by the presence or absence of a large mirror in the second room; independently, the second booklet contained either a straightforward persuasive communication or a coercive communication. In both cases, the communication attributed to an unnamed University official favored the appointment of the candidate. The coerciveness in the high threat condition was supplied by a beginning sentence that read There are a number

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of reasons why I know you must conclude that Thomas is the only rational choice for this position," and a final sentence that read "There is no question that Adrian Thomas is the man for the job. You have no choice but to agree with me." After reading one of these persuasive messages, the subject was asked to indicate again how much she favored or opposed the candidate's appointment. The degree and direction of shifts in opinion constituted the dependent measure of the study. As was predicted, self-aware subjects who received the high threat communication resisted the persuasion attempt more than did subjects of any other group. This finding seems to indicate that self-awareness does intensify the reactance effect.

A second study later was conducted, making use of exactly the same experimental materials and most of the same experimental procedures, but extending the results in two different ways. First, this study made use of males rather than females as subjects. Secondly, rather than manipulate self-attention, in this study we examined individual differences in the disposition to be self-attentive. This disposition has been termed "self-consciousness" in order to distinguish it from the manipulated state of self-awareness. However, there is now a great deal of evidence that the two converge on the same psychological entity. Factor analyses of the self-consciousness scale have distinguished two separable components: private self-consciousness. which concerns awareness of one's feelings, attitudes, motivations, and so on (the internal or hidden aspects of the self); and public self-consciousness, which concerns awareness of oneself as a social object, i.e., the way one is perceived by others and impresses others. Subjects in this second experiment were selected on the basis of their private self-consciousness scores, because our underlying reasoning had to do with internal processes rather than external aspects of the self. As I said before, the procedures were the same as in the first study, except that self-awareness was not experimentally manipulated. The results of this second study were much the same as those of the first. The greatest resistance to persuasion occurred among highly self-conscious subjects who were given the high-threat communication.

The next study extended our reasoning to a different kind of reactance experience. Others have pointed out that threats to one's freedom can come from many sources. In what I've discussed so far the source was an external agent. However, threats to freedom can be self-imposed. For example, when a person is asked to choose between two desirable alternatives, an inital preference for one may represent a threat to his freedom to choose the other. This self-imposed threat could be reduced (or the freedom reasserted) by revaluing the choice alternatives. That is, by adjusting his preferences so that one alternative no longer seems more desirable than the other, the person regains his perceived freedom of choice. Previous research has shown that this equivocation increases as the decision time is perceived as drawing nearer. We used this paradigm to assess the role of dispositional self-consciousness in this phenomenon. Female undergraduates from Carnegie-Mellon University were led to believe that they would be undergoing an interview concerning a variety of topics. In order to provide useful information, it ostensibly was important that there be good rapport between the subject and the interviewer. Thus the subject was going to be allowed first to read profiles of two interviewers who were available, then to talk briefly with each of them, and finally to choose between them. Subjects were given the profile information and escorted to an experimental cubicle. The subject was asked to indicate an "initial opinion" of each interviewer immediately after reading the descriptions. In the low threat condition, sufjects were told that there would be a short delay before they could meet the interviewers--thus the decision was relatively far away and an initial preference would not be expecially freedom-threatening. In the high threat condition, no delay was mentioned--thus subjectively the decision loomed nearer. It was in this condition that the most equivocation was expected, and it was the highly self-conscious persons in whom this tendency was expected to be most pronounced. The subject rated each of the interviewers separately. The dependent measure of the study was the absolute difference between the two ratings. Our expectations again were confirmed. The smallest difference in ratings occured among highly self-conscious subjects in the high threat condition.

These three studies appear to be important in two respects. First, they seem to suggest that self-directed attention mediates the reassertion of freedom that is caused by reactance-inducing manipulations. As I indicated earlier, there are several ways in which this might have happened. One possibility rests on the reasoning that a threat to freedom can have an impact only after that threat has been perceived or encoded at some level. The extraction of a threatening implication from the kind of stimuli used in reactance research often requires rather thorough processing of the information contained in the reactance-inducing stimuli. That is, the threat is very subtle. Perhaps that processing, being an internal activity, requires self-attention. There is some evidence for this, but it is somewhat equivocal.

Another possible interpretation derives from the speculation that reactance-inducing stimuli produce negative affect. Perhpas self-focus in this situation leads merely to greater awareness of that existing affect, and thus greater responsivity to it. This line of reasoning would be consistent with findings from a number of studies showing that self-focus leads to heightened responsiveness to transient emotional states.

A third possibility stems from the assumption that the threat to freedom causes freedom-restoration to be adopted as a desired goal or behavioral standard. Self-focus, then, may exaggerate the tendency to do any behavior that is consistent with attaining that goal. This would be the familiar matching-to-standard process, which has been demonstrated repeatedly to be a consequence of self-attention.

There is a fourth possibility as well, which is more speculative, but which to me is in many ways the most intriguing of all. When a person perceives a choice or a preference as being forced on him perhaps his initial reponse is to try to escape from that position. In doing so, perhaps the person takes the value that is being imposed, but adopts and uses it as a negatively-valenced goal state rather than a positively-valenced one. Subsequent behavior would then represent an attempt to distance oneself from the standard of comparison. Were this the case, these studies would be the first demonstrations that self-attention can in some circumstances lead to active attempts to enlarge the discrepancy between self and standard, rather than reduce it. This reasoning has at least one precedent in the literature of social psychology. Newcomb, in the context of social comparison theory, discussed reference groups as being either positive or negative. We compare ourselves to some groups (positive reference groups) in order to feel or to become more like them; we compare ourselves to other groups (negative reference groups) in order to maximize the differences between them and ourselves. In the one case we have a matching-to-standard process, in the other case a distancing-from-standard process.

This fourth possibility--that distancing-from-standard occured in the research I have discussed here--has a good many theoretical implications. These implications are interesting, but discussion of them would take us far beyond the scope of this presentation. Moreover, it bears repeating that this interpretation of these results is highly speculative. Before going too far down this road of speculation, it will be necessary to design studies to compare the various possible interpretations of the demonstrated effect, to determine which is most reasonable.

A second important implication of these findings stems from the fact that they provide yet another example of the functional equivalence of manipulated self-awareness and dispositional self-consciousness. The findings thus add to a growing accumulation of evidence that these two variables, as research tools, converge on the same psychological entity. This convergence has important and potentially far-reaching implications concerning the validity of self-awareness as a construct. One of the difficulties that self-awareness theory has had over the years is the absence of demonstrations of discriminant validity for self-awareness manipulations. For self-consciousness, in contrast, there is a great deal of evidence of discriminant validity. This evidence renders alternative interpretations of dispositional self-consciousness effects much less tenable than they would otherwise be. To the degree that dispositional and manipulated self-focus converge empirically, as has been the case in these studies, additional credibility accrues for self-awareness as a construct, as well.